

# **Elders team up to help create five-storey mural; Artist rallies people of various cultures together for art project to promote unity**

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## **Body**

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A group of about 10 people gathered on Saturday on the second floor of a low office building on Bentley Avenue, in an industrial park near Hunt Club and Merivale roads, where they picked up paint brushes and paints to work on several 4x8-foot acrylic panels.

Most were not professional artists, but rather simply elders from many cultures, including Chinese, Iraqi, Indian, New Zealand, Métis and Algonquin, who share a love of planet Earth and a desire to promote unity.

On this day, they were painting a 12-foot Algonquin drum, one of the central elements of a mural that, when completed and assembled on the outside of an Ottawa apartment building, will measure 32x48 feet, a bright and spectacular reminder to passersby of their connection to nature and to one another and the need to respect both.

The Wisdom Mural project is the creation of Claudia Salguero, a multidisciplinary Colombian-Canadian artist in Ottawa and member of Arts Network Ottawa's board of directors who in recent years has created more than 40 murals in Ottawa.

Salguero expects the mural will be in place by mid-August on the south side of the Ottawa Community Housing apartment building at 1365 Bank St., across from Billings Bridge shopping centre.

"This is my most ambitious project yet," Salguero says. "Not in terms of the size, but in terms of what it means and the participation of the community. The participation of the Indigenous elders and knowledge-keepers has been key. I've just been the interpreter of their messages and teachings."

In creating the mural, Salguero received input from the elders, who discussed meaningful elements that their different cultures shared. Many of these elements, including the Milky Way, running water, a large sunflower, planet Earth and the golden ratio, were included in the final design. At the bottom right corner of the mural, a lone person's face takes it all in.

The only elements of the mural that are specific to any particular cultures are the Algonquin drum and - a late addition to the design - 1,000 stars representing the children whose unmarked graves were recently discovered at the sites of former residential schools.

"It's amazing how in every culture, history goes back to the same point, which is nature, and the sun, and the water," says Salguero, who adds that the inspiration to create the Wisdom Mural came from the pain she has felt over humankind's disconnection from nature.

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"We are just so into our fast lives and cellphones and technology, and we are destroying the planet just to lead a comfortable life, and we're forgetting that Mother Nature is our mother, and we need to protect her. I've travelled in Australia and seen the fires. I'm from Colombia and have seen the devastation in the Amazon.

"We need to heal that. We need to send the message that we are destroying the planet and that we're just a little part of the planet. We are not the owners of the planet."

Mowafak Nema, an Iraqi-Ottawa artist involved in the project, adds this perspective: "This is a wakeup call. It's time to stop hurting this planet and respect it. Never mind Mars; this is our home."

Another participant, Robert McDonald, a Métis, says that, "as an Indigenous person in Canada, you always want to pay respect to Mother Earth, to the people who got us here. And this is a way to tell others who maybe don't understand the Indigenous community around the world that we're all connected, by Mother Earth, by the environment, and we need to protect each other."

For Claire Brascoupé, a young Kitigan Zibi Algonquin artist who is being mentored by Salguero, the Wisdom Mural will help fill a void that has long existed in Ottawa.

"I felt that, growing up in Ottawa, there hasn't been a lot of Algonquin representation in public art. Just walking down the street, you wouldn't know you were on Algonquin territory. So to have something very public, that lots of people can see, and to be able to say, 'Hey, that's a piece of me. That's Algonquin,' is meaningful for me and for other Indigenous people in the city."

The 1365 Bank St. building is the first of three OCH buildings Salguero hopes to similarly cover with art, if she can raise enough funds. The sponsorships she has developed with 10 suppliers and social organizations, she says, hasn't covered all her expenses and she started a GoFundMe campaign to raise nearly \$18,000.

Visit [claudiasalguero.com](http://claudiasalguero.com) for more information, or [gofundme.com/f/help-us-create-the-wisdom-mural](https://gofundme.com/f/help-us-create-the-wisdom-mural) to donate. bdeachman@postmedia.com !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

## Graphic

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Photos: Ashley Fraser; Elders from various cultural communities are working on a large-scale mural project. Alice Wong says this is the second piece she has had the pleasure to work on.;; Claudia Salguero is heading the Wisdom Mural project, which is creating a mural to remind passersby of their connection to nature and one another.;

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